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Creating Jazz Bass Lines

By Jim Stinnett

Creating Jazz Bass Lines is the first in a series of lessons to be presented on walking bass. In this first lesson, I will cover some basic material that all players should know regardless of style preference. Understand, when I use the word "know," I mean: able to play perfectly in all keys. "To know and not do, is to not know."

I have many students who come to me wanting to improve their walking lines. Most of them feel that they need new concepts and material to make their lines more interesting and hip. The truth is all of these students need to know the basics MUCH better. When you have mastered a set of pitches, only then will you be able to improvise with this material. When you can easily improvise with a predetermined group of notes, you will sound infinitely fresh and creative. One does not need exotic notes to sound good. You need control!

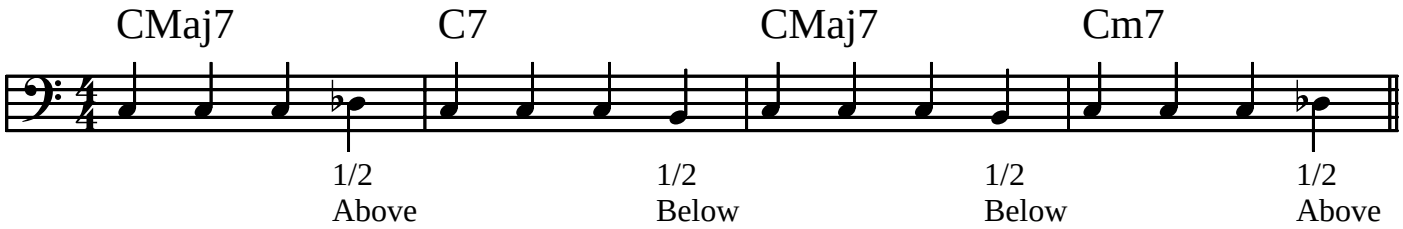
To work on a lesson so much that you master the material requires you to learn patience and persistence. It is also vital that you do not get ahead of yourself by moving too fast or trying to incorporate too many variables into your practicing. I often tell students at this level of development, you do not need to practice improvising. You need to systematically practice those elements that you will use when you do improvise.

When you have mastered Creating Jazz Bass Lines, you will be amazed how often you will hear these lines on recordings of great players. Also, I want to assure you that you cannot practice the basics too much. The stronger the foundation, the higher we can build.

Part 1 - Tension/Resolution

A very common technique used by all great players for creating tension and resolution in their playing is the half-step approach (above and below).

Ex. 1 - Half-Step Approaches



Some of these half-steps are diatonic and some are chromatic. Both sound good because they lead to the root of the following chord, and this creates a very strong resolution. Do not be concerned that some of the half-steps are not chord tones. In fact, many half-step approaches on paper seem to clash with the chord. Play them along with the chord changes and you will hear the jazz-sounding movement.

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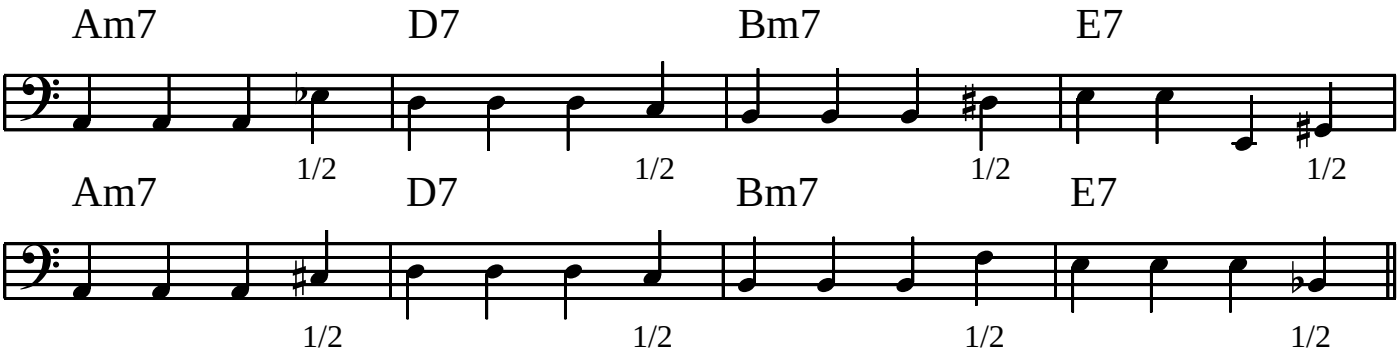
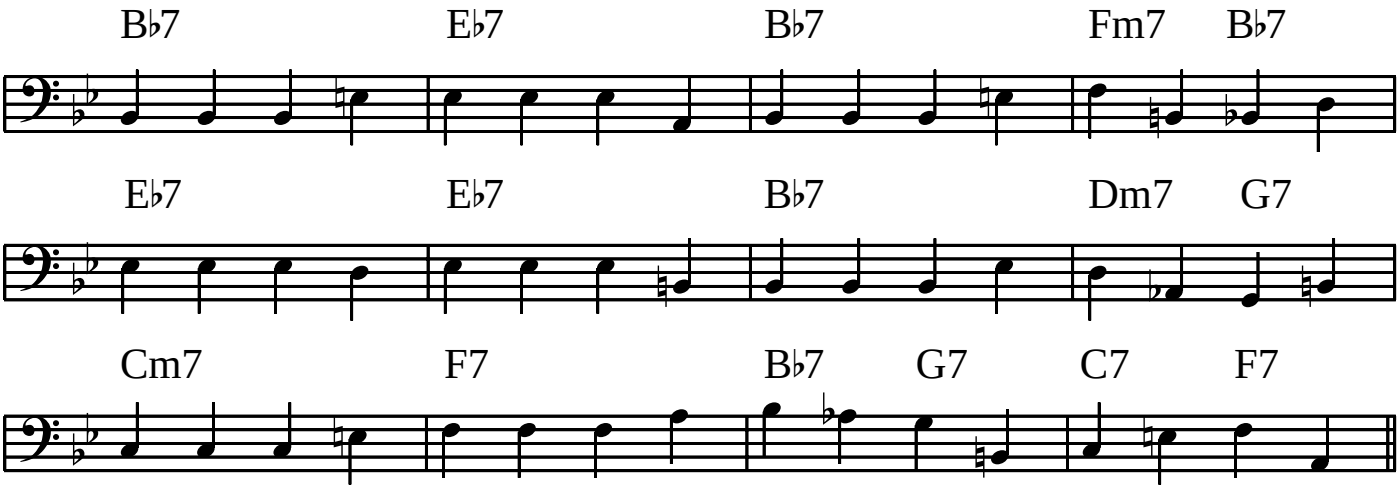
Ex. 2 - ii-V's



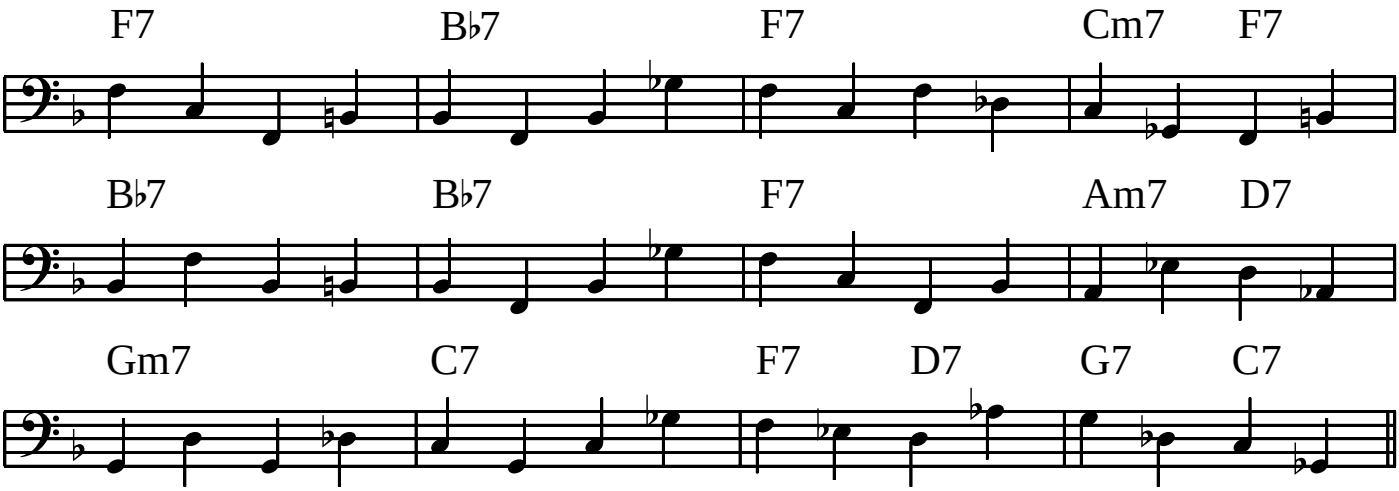
Ex. 3 - Blues In Bb With Roots And Half-Steps Above



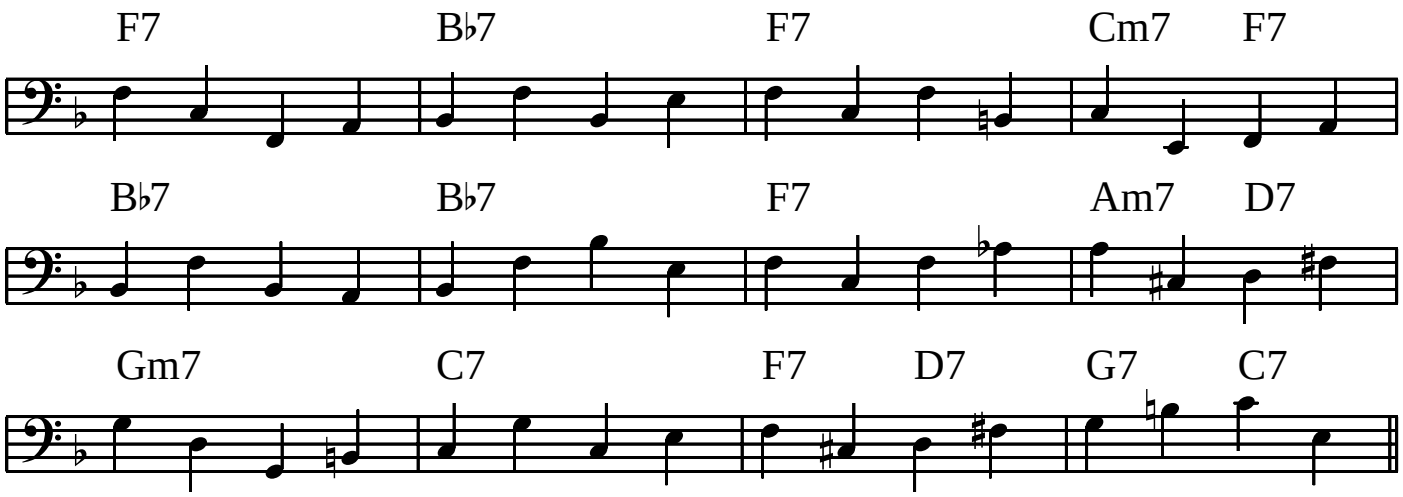
Part 2 - Chord Tones

The next step in Creating Jazz Bass Lines is the addition of chord tones: 3rd, 5th and 7th. Let us begin by using the pattern: root, 5th, root, half-step above.

Ex. 4 - Blues In F With Root/5th/Root/Half-Step Above



Ex. 5 - Blues In F With Root/5th/Root/Half-Step Below

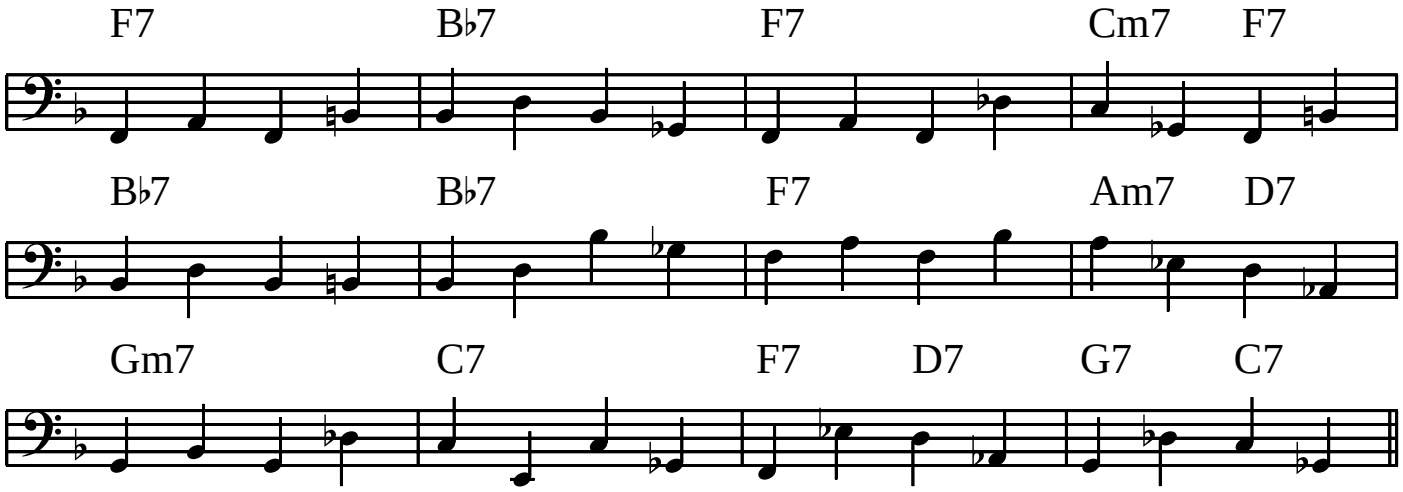


It is important to practice using only one pattern at a time. For example, do not mix the half-step above and half-step below. If you will focus on a specific pattern, you will more quickly internalize the sound and feel in your hands. The goal is to develop muscle memory in connection with a specific sound.

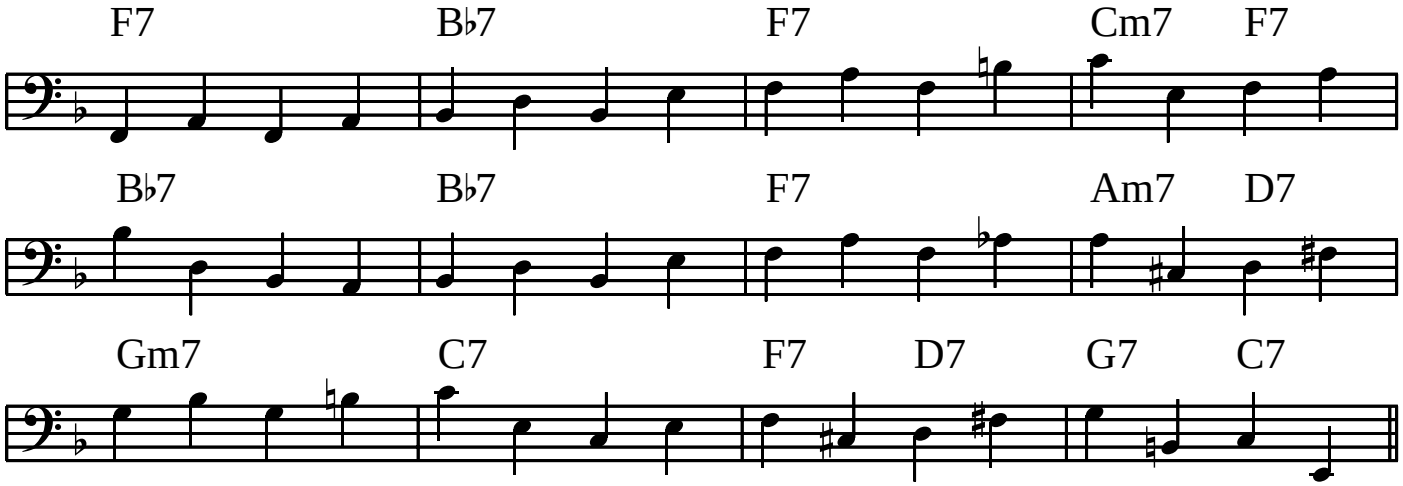
Notice, when two chords per measure are used, you will not have time to play the chord tone and still play the 1/2 step approach. In this case, let the 1/2 step take priority.

Let's now use the 3rd of each chord. Be sure to recognize the difference between major and minor thirds.

Ex. 6 - Blues In F With Root/3rd/Root/Half-Step Above

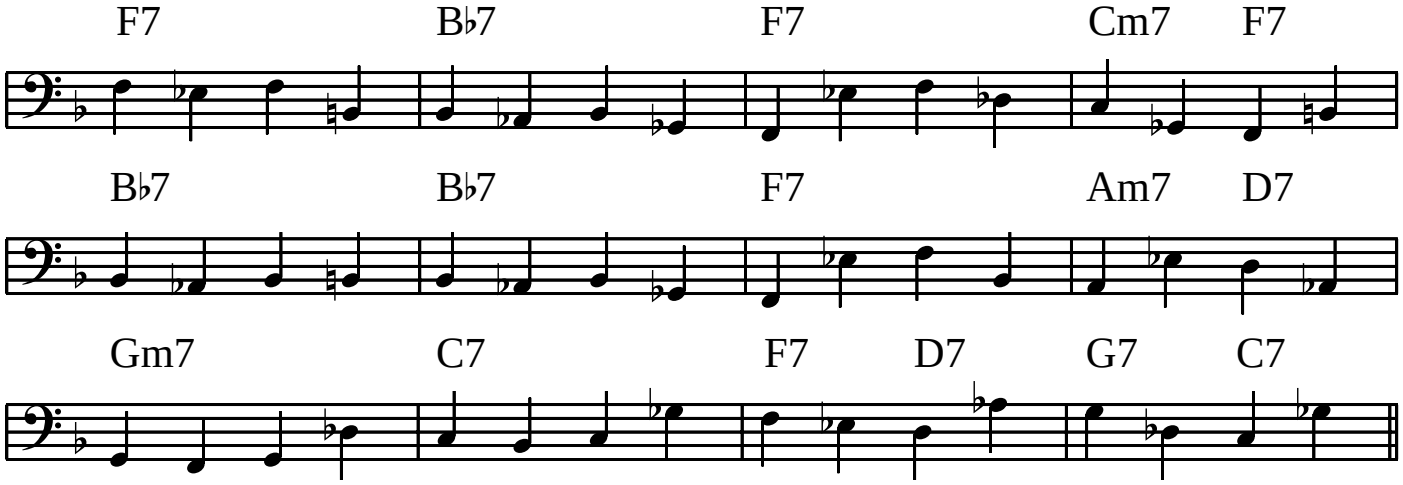


Ex. 7 - Blues In F With Root/3rd/Root/Half-Step Below

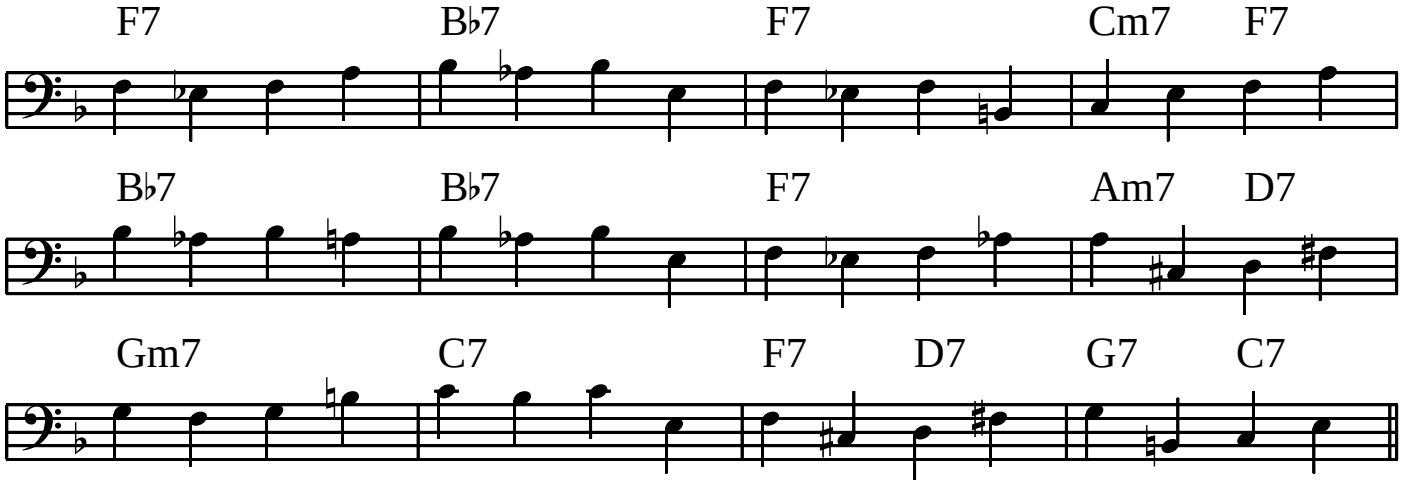


Next, we will work with the 7th of each chord. Notice how the seventh is played as a pitch below the root rather than above. This often sounds better.

Ex. 8 - Blues In F With Root/7th/Root/Half-Step Above



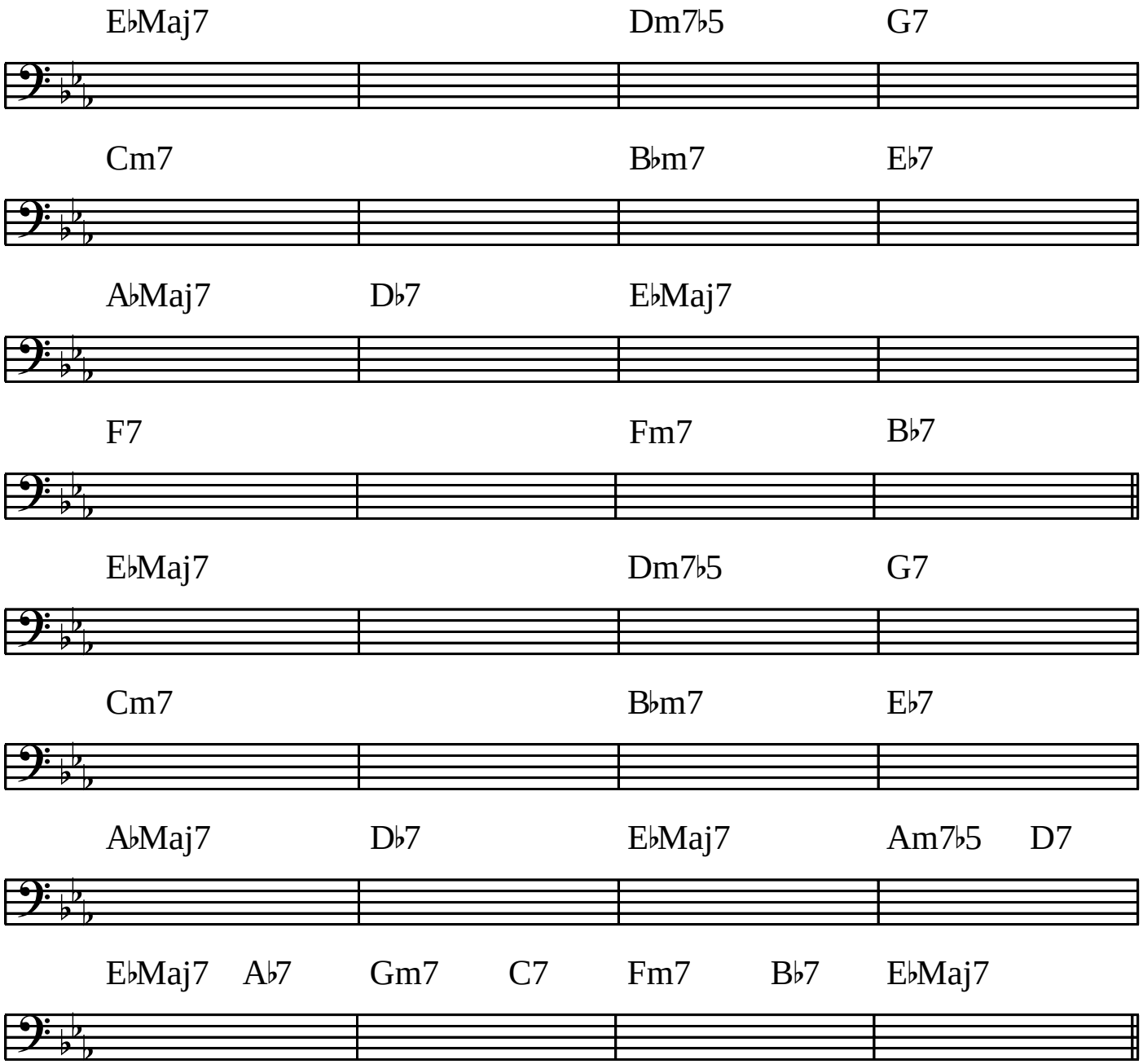
Ex. 9 - Blues In F With Root/7th/Root/Half-Step Below



Part 3 - All Patterns On Standard Chord Changes

Using the previously learned patterns, play each pattern for the full song.
- Root/Root/Root/Half-Step (above and below)
- Root/5th/Root/Half-Step
- Root/3rd/Root/Half-Step
- Root/7th/Root/Half-Step

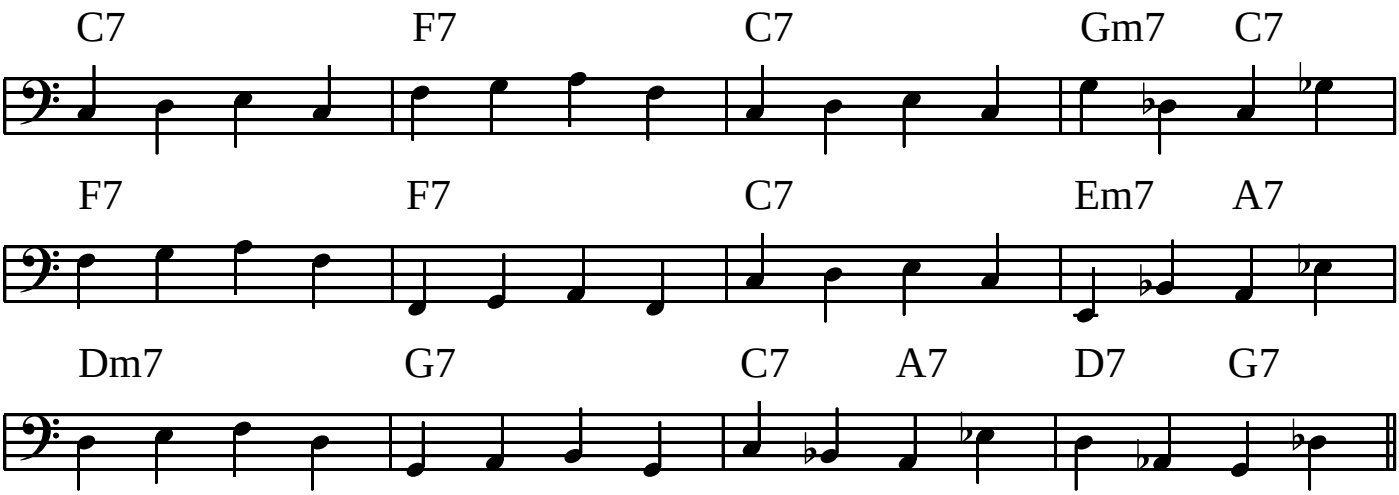
Ex. 10 - "There Will Never Be Another You"



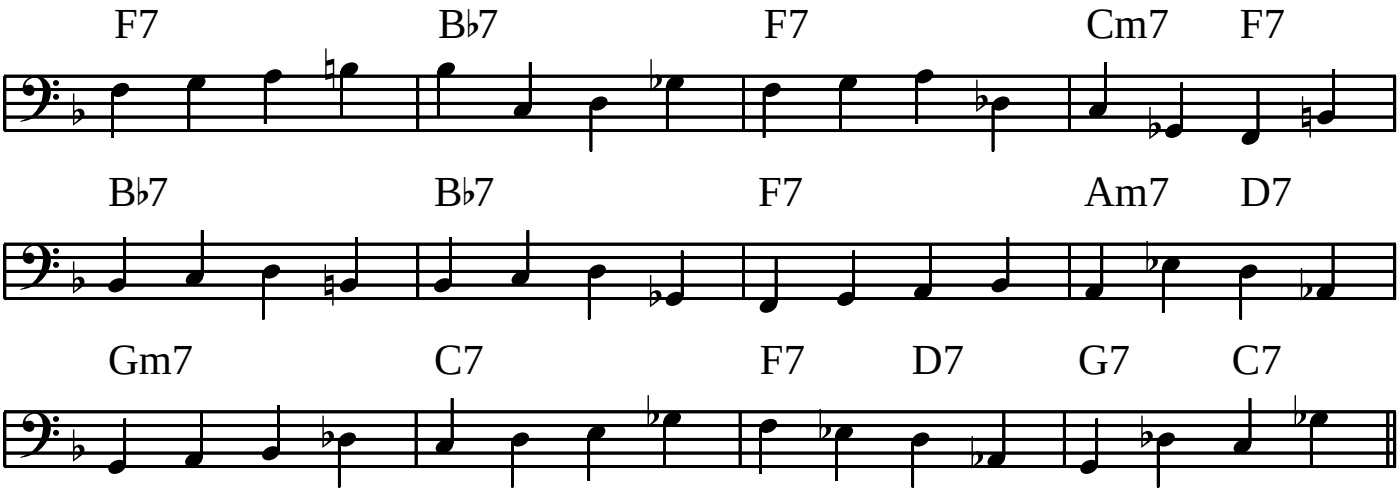
Part 4 - Passing Tones

The note between two chord tones is called a passing tone. This pattern of root/passing tone/third is very common in walking lines. We will use the four quarter-note patterns labeled with scale degrees 1-2-3-1/2 or 1-2-3-1.

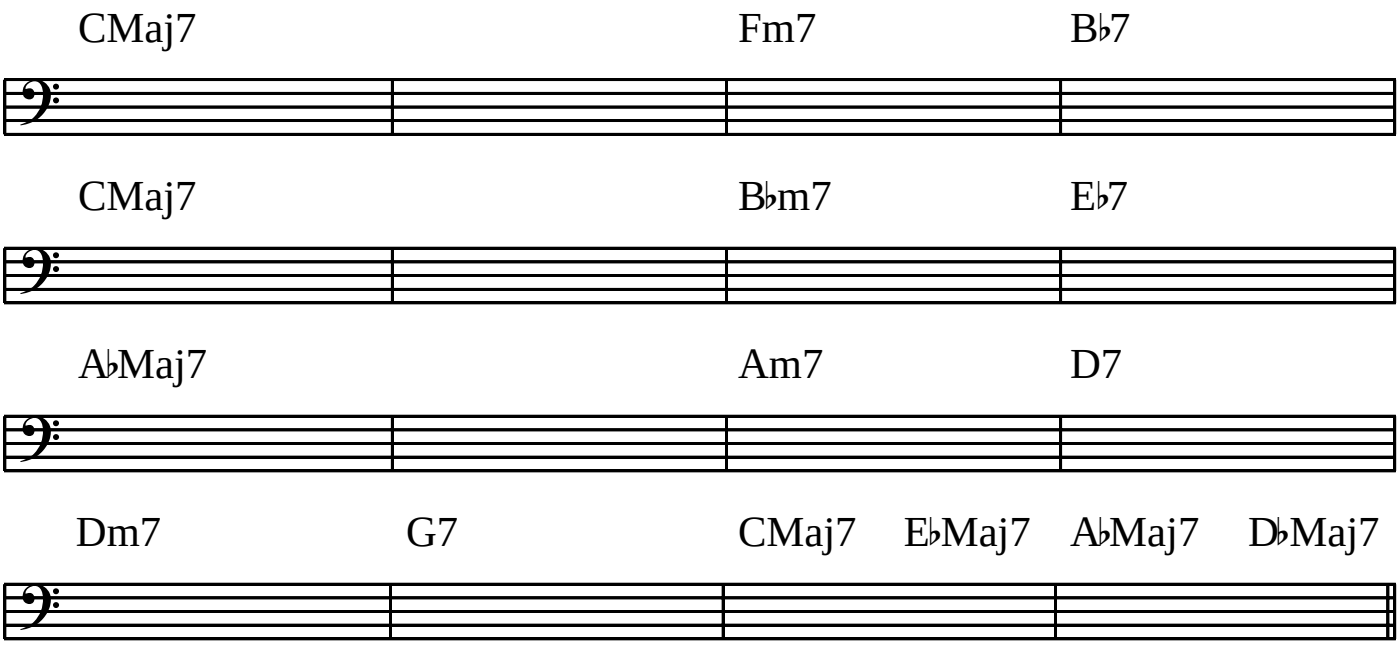
Ex. 11 - Blues In C: 1-2-3-1



Ex. 12 - Blues In F: 1-2-3-1/2

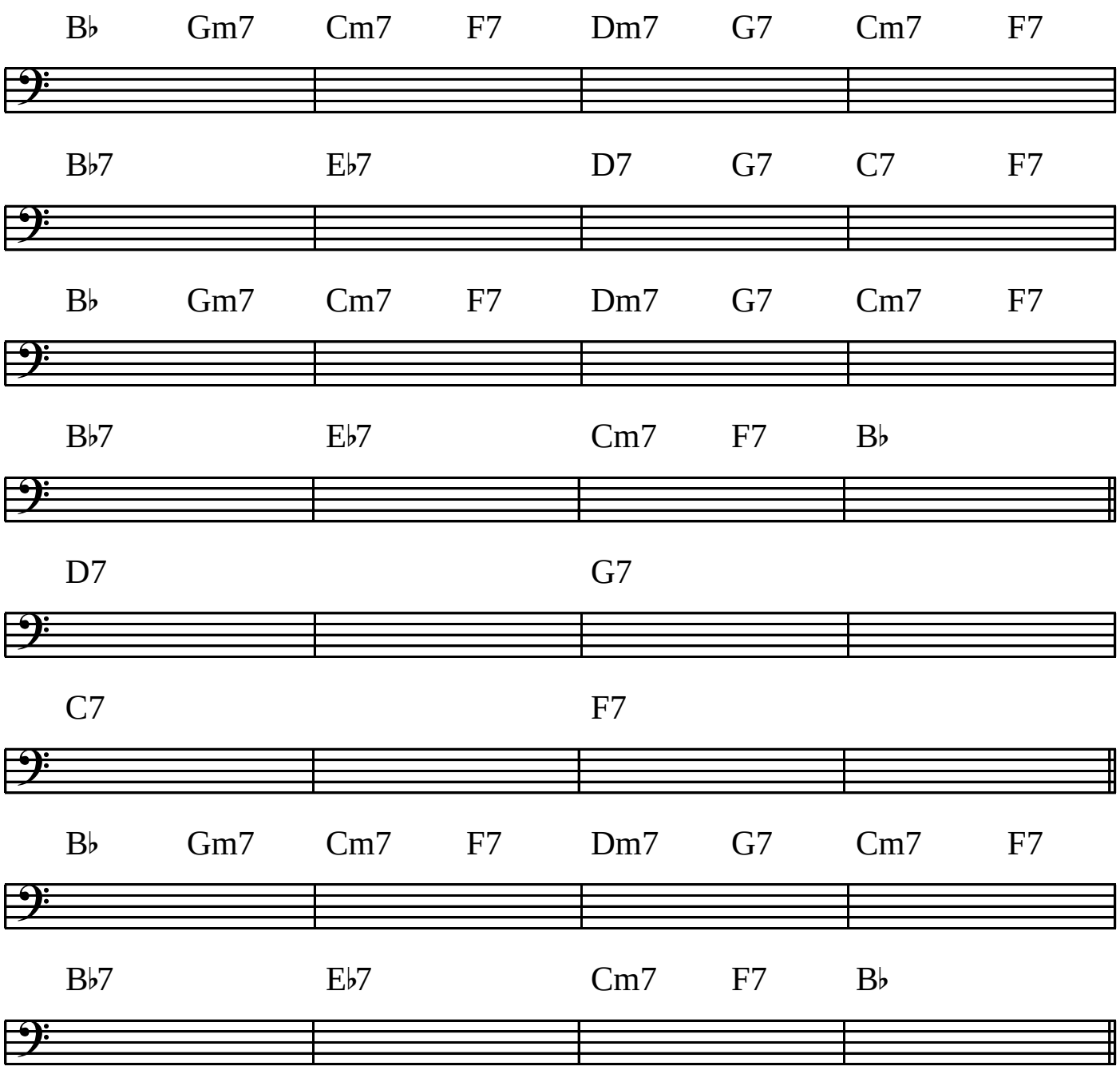


Ex. 13 & 14 - "Lady Bird": 1-2-3-1 And 1-2-3-1/2



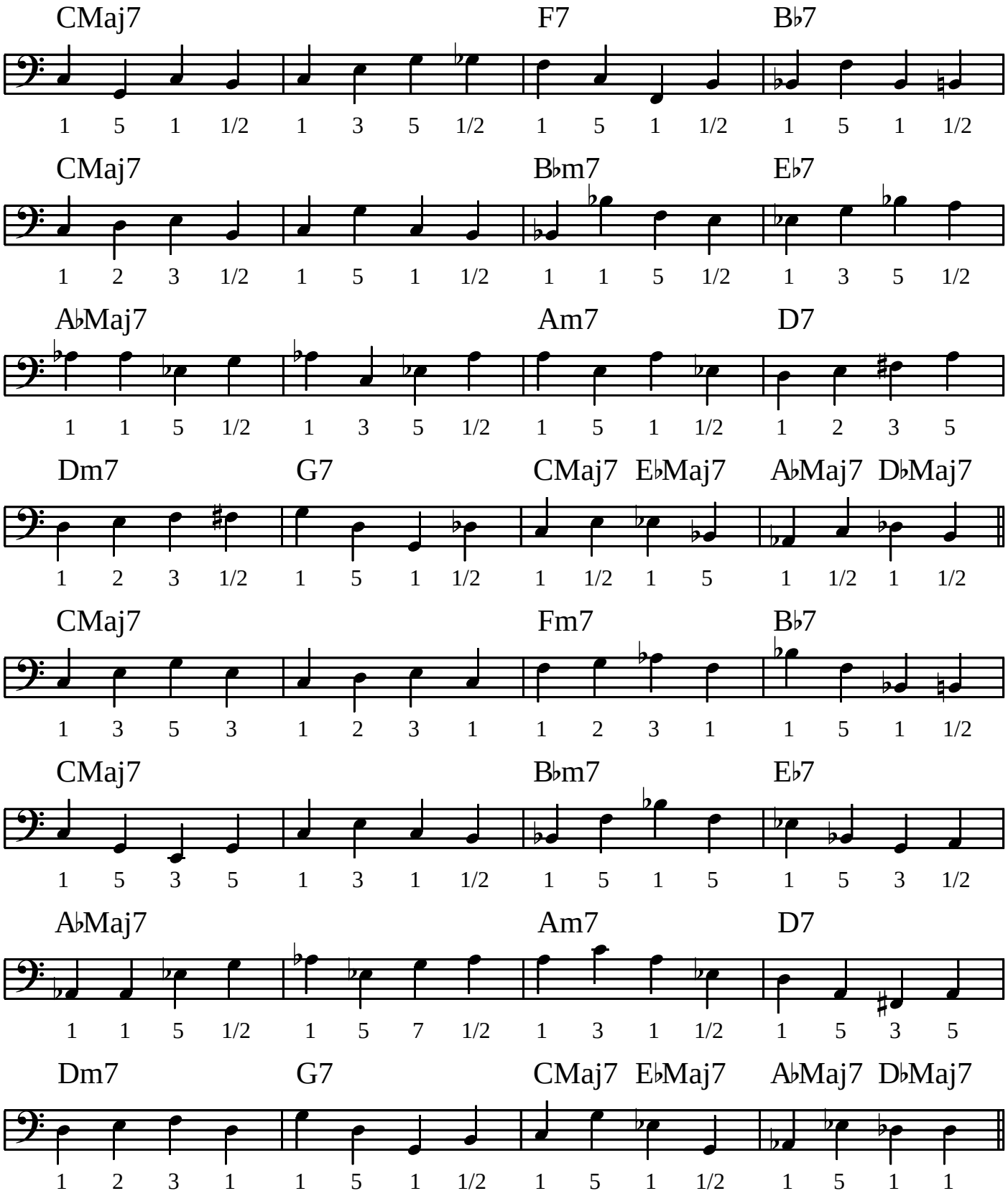
At this point, I would like to suggest that you learn the Blues, Rhythm Changes, and two standard songs using the previously presented patterns. It is MOST IMPORTANT for you to learn these songs and patterns in a variety of keys. Do not try to do this by memory. Write out the changes in each key. Do not write out the pitches. Learn to play (feel) and recognize (hear) each pattern. I must warn you. This is where many students will try to shortcut the process. If you do not learn to play these patterns in multiple keys you will NOT be able to freely improvise with them. Take the time to learn everything in each key and you will be amazed with the results.

Ex. 15 - "Rhythm Changes"

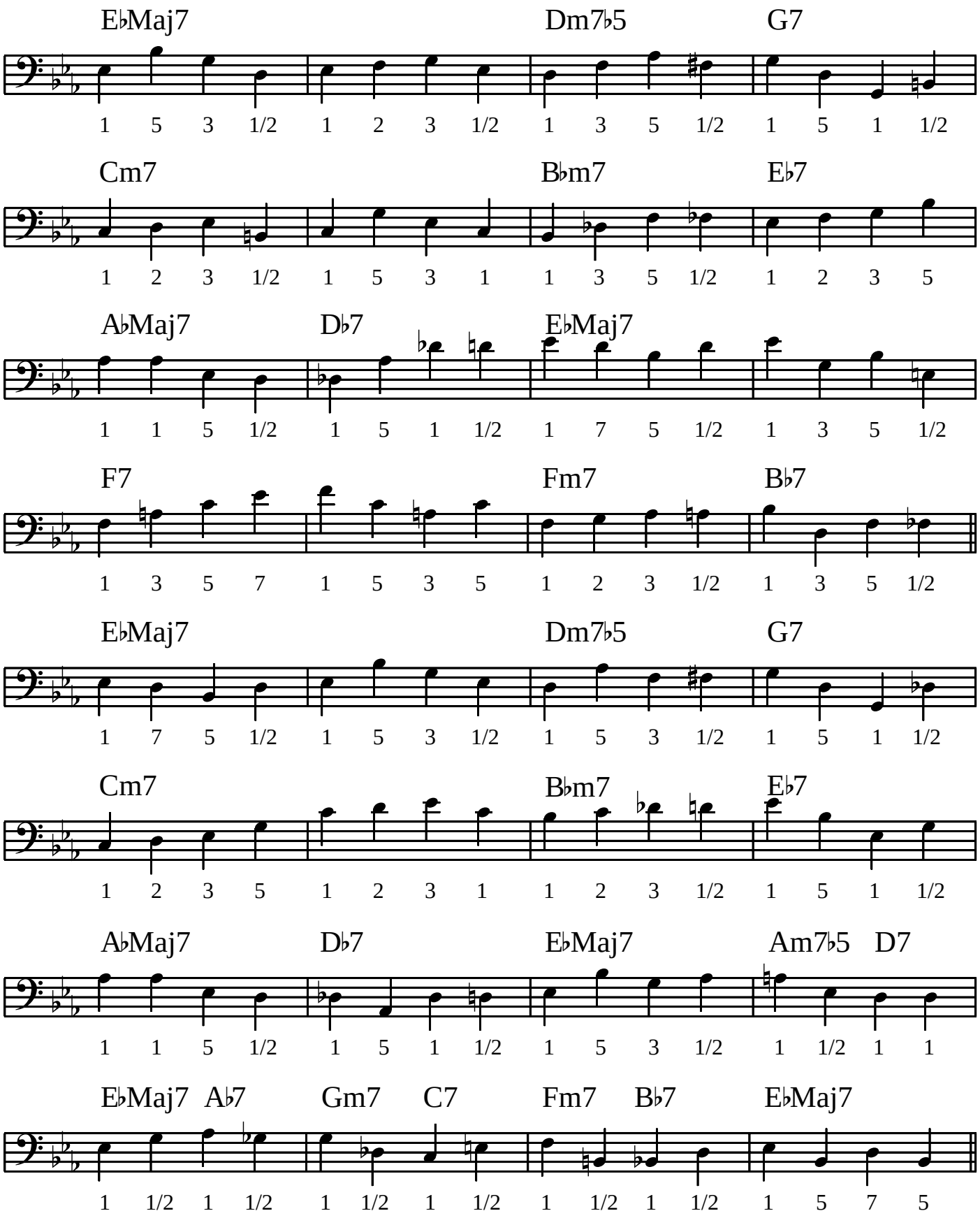


Part 5 - Analysis

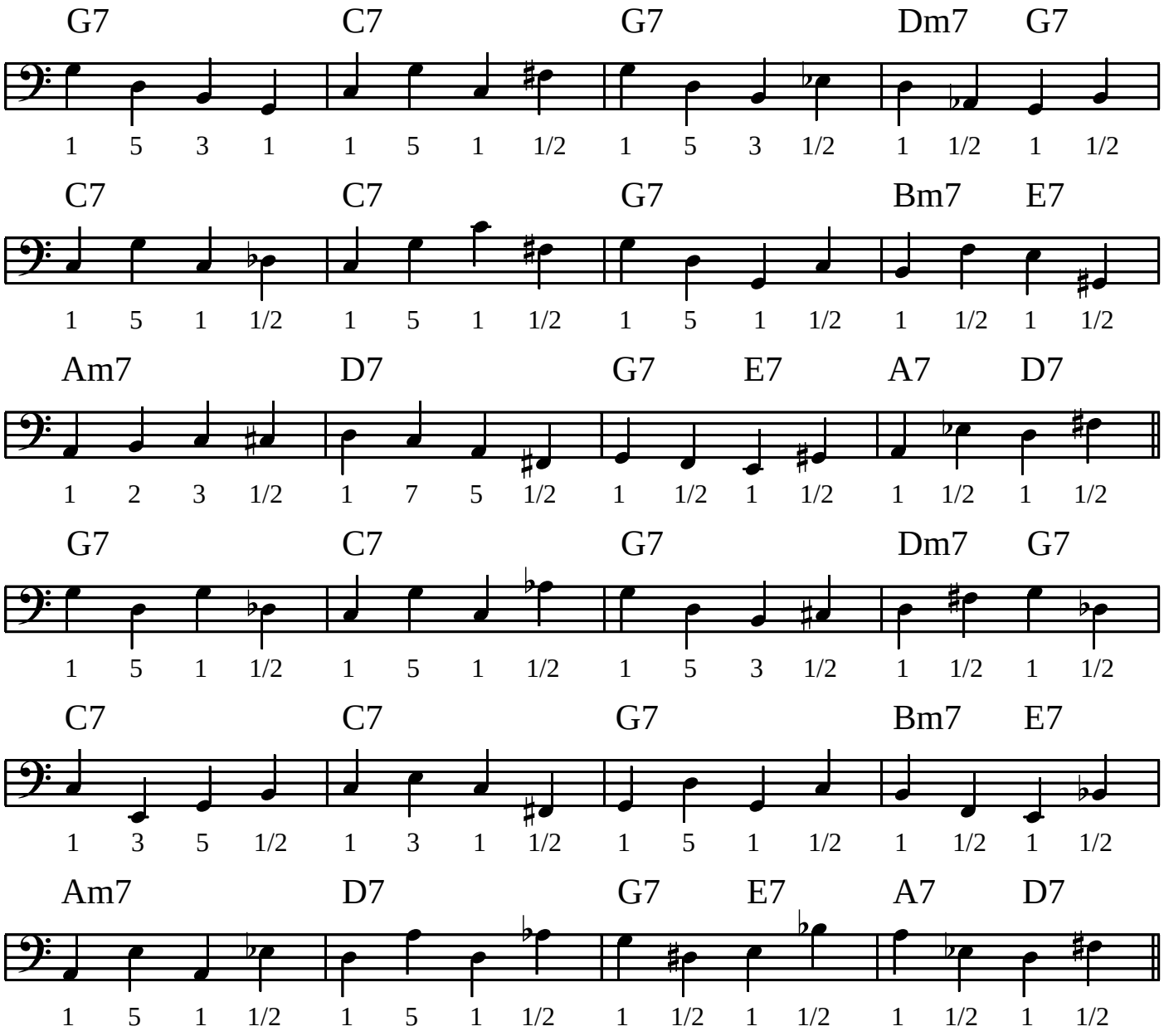
Ex. 16 - "Lady Bird" With Analysis



Ex. 17 - "There Will Never Be Another You" With Analysis



Ex. 18 Blues In G With Analysis



Conclusion

Congratulations! If you have mastered the music presented here, you are on your way to playing good walking lines. If you cannot play all of the patterns, in all keys, spend more time to get this basic stuff DOWN. Remember, just because you understand it does not mean you can play it fluently. Take the time to build a solid foundation.

In this lesson, we began each chord change using the root of the given chord. In upcoming lessons, we will explore other choices.

To make sure you are thoroughly learning the material in Creating Jazz Bass Lines, I suggest that you set a goal for each example. When you can play the song ten times in a row, in time, non-stop, with no mistakes, it is time to move to the next example. Be patient and strive for consistency.

As there are no musical police, it is true that you can play any notes you want when walking a bass line. However, style characteristics and tradition define a "good" line. I encourage you to copy the bass lines of great players such as Paul Chambers, Ray Brown, Ron Carter, and Christian McBride. By imitating the masters, your playing will begin to sound mature and solid. With much study and practice, you will subconsciously begin to arrange your choices of pitches into lines that sound good to your ear. These choices, in turn, will begin to define your style. It is a common mistake for students to want to do their "own thing" before they are accomplished at some traditional things. My answer to this question is that if you work on the theme long and hard enough, you will naturally begin to play variations. This is called improvisation. But, if you slight the theme and focus on the variations, your playing will often not be solid. At this stage, do not worry about how creative your lines sound. Just listen to how solid they are. I assure you that when your playing can be described as solid, you will have all the gigs you need.

For a more in-depth study of these concepts, see Jim's book titled *Creating Jazz Bass Lines* available at: JimStinnett.com.